



Key points:

- **Include class parties in 504 meeting agenda**
- **Talk with parents beforehand**
- **Offer student alternatives to party**

Prepare students with anxiety for holiday parties

Schools and classrooms will likely be celebrating at least a few of the various U.S. calendar holidays over the next couple of months. While this is fun for many students, those with anxiety disorders may not share in the delight.

"It's one of the delicate balances," said David L. Gneiting, Section 504 coordinator for the [Nebo \(Utah\) School District](#). "You don't want to say, 'We're not going to have a party because this student can't deal with parties.' That's not fair to the rest of the class."

Instead, here are some things you can do to prepare the student.

- **Discuss accommodations at the 504 team meeting.** Don't assume that a student won't be able to handle classroom parties just because she has an anxiety disorder, said Tammy Somogye, a school attorney at [Lathrop Gage LLP](#) in Overland Park, Kan. Each student is different, and the way that anxiety presents itself for each student is different, she said.

Include class parties in the student's 504 meeting agenda. Discuss the data collected on the student. "If the team has information to confirm that the student needs accommodations to participate in classroom parties or needs to be excused, then make sure accommodations are clearly written so we know what we're supposed to do when we have such an event," Somogye said.

- **Involve parents in the party planning process.** Depending on how severe the student's anxiety is, the parent may opt to keep her child home the day of the class party, Gneiting said. But teachers can also invite the parents to help plan the party. Talk to parents about what sorts of things they do at home to lessen anxiety when the student is going to do something unfamiliar, then consider adopting those strategies for the classroom party.

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" Oftentimes that parent will actually come and sit in on the class that day," Gneiting said. Having a parent there to help the student participate may relieve some of the stress around the party, Somogye said.

- **Share information with parents, student.** If the party is being planned by parent volunteers, ask them in advance what the activities will be so that you can make appropriate arrangements for the student with the 504 plan, Somogye said. Consider sharing the information first with the anxious student's parents so they can provide input about whether the student can participate and so you can learn whether a parent plans to attend.

Depending on the student's age, talk to him about the upcoming party, Gneiting said. "The older a student is, the easier it is to get input from them and the more they're able to understand what's happening," he said.

Say things like, "There are the things that will happen at the party: We will play this game, eat this snack, etc." This might help lessen the student's anxiety, Somogye said. You can also encourage the parents to talk with the student at home about the party beforehand.

- **Offer alternatives.** Give the student a choice about whether to attend, Somogye said. "Identify examples of activities they can do instead," she said.

For alternate activities, suggest something that is a favorite of the student and will keep her calm, such as coloring. Or, if the party involves a large group activity and it's possible to do so, grab a small number of students and replicate the same activity in a less stimulating environment, such as in a communal area outside the classroom, in another classroom, or in the library, Somogye said.

- **Permit the student to take a break or leave.** If the student does attend the party, give her permission to leave if she starts to feel overwhelmed, Somogye said. Agree on a signal, such as a flash pass, that the student can show when she needs to step out.

Talk with the parents beforehand about the student's permission to leave the party altogether if she chooses to do so. But don't make the student leave if she does want to participate, Somogye said.

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• **Implement the student's everyday accommodations.** Accommodations that have been put in place for the student involving classroom group work can also work for classroom parties, Somogye said. For example, the student may already routinely get advance notice of what he is going to do in class each day. In that instance, explaining

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November 15, 2018

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